Indigenous Student Participation In Higher Education: Emergent Themes And Linkages

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ABSTRACT

Educational processes directed at Indigenous peoples have long propagated a disparity between the educational successes of Indigenous and non–Indigenous students (May 1999), a contrast which can be acutely observed in Australia. It is not surprising, then, that the educational needs of Indigenous students have been poorly served, with the extant literature clearly declaring that there is much work to be done (Malin & Maidment, 2003). Although there have been numerous studies seeking to understand (and by extension, redress) issues pertaining to participation by minority groups in education (such as Indigenous communities), many of these undertakings fail to adequately articulate and consider the importance of cultural factors and how such realities form a unique foundation with respect to Indigenous educational policy and development options. In addressing this shortcoming, this paper explores critical, community capacity building and community empowerment strategies that may inform policies and programmes for the reduction of educational disparities, increasing Indigenous student participation in higher education and promoting Indigenous–led educational initiatives. As such, this exploratory study highlights a number of emergent themes derived by community representatives, including both Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and non–Indigenous participants, during a series of focus group discussions.

Keywords: Indigenous Higher Education Participation; Educational Initiatives; Indigenous Led Research

INTRODUCTION

Discourse on the challenges and perceived solutions within the field of Indigenous education have been considered since the 1960s (Penman, 2006). These discussions and research efforts have brought together many broad stakeholders, including practitioners, educators, historians, social scientists, psychologists, community representatives, and academic researchers (Malin & Maidment, 2003). Notwithstanding these efforts, the United Nations State of the World's Indigenous Peoples report (released in 2009) outlined continued concerns related to the inclusion (or lack thereof) of Indigenous Peoples in contemporary educational systems and institutions, advocating a position whereby Indigenous Peoples should have the right to establish and control their educational processes, utilising their own language in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009). Studies into cultural safety within higher educational institutions are hence beginning to emerge (for example, Aseron, Greymorning, Miller & Wilde, 2013).

Indigenous Australians (the First Nations People of Australia, to be referred to as Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders henceforth) have traditionally formed one of the most socially, economically and, in the context of the current study, educationally disadvantaged community groups in Australia. Numerous governmental and educational agencies have implemented programs aimed at enhancing the participation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in education, generally, and higher education, specifically. Despite these often

fragmented efforts, the participation levels of First Nation Australians in higher education still remain below those for non–Indigenous Australians (Encel, 2000). Recent figures provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) indicate:

- Forty-five percent of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders stayed on to year 12 at high school (the final year of high school studies within the Australian education system), compared with 76% for the Australian population as a whole. This figure (45%) rose from 39% in 2003.
- In 2010, 40% of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had a vocational or higher education qualification (up from 22% in 2001), compared with 63% for the Australian population as a whole.
- Seven percent of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders held a bachelor degree or higher, compared with 27% for the population as a whole. In 2001, 4% of First Nation Australians held a bachelor degree or higher.

Despite an overall positive improvement between 2001 and 2010, there is a clear recognition that without significant changes across a myriad of reforms (including a forceful attitudinal shift by policy makers toward 'authentic' collaborative partnerships and consultation with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities), the opportunities and initiatives from which these gaps may be 'closed' will be severely diminished. As such, a continuing need to identify factors and vulnerabilities that contribute to the obstacles facing Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the continuation of further studies would appear to be particularly relevant to this discourse. A key aim of this investigation was therefore to better understand the various ways in which participation of First Nations Australian students in higher education might be improved and how such challenges may help speak to future strategic directions and policy initiatives within higher education institutions, as well as broader stakeholder groups (such as NGO's and local, regional and Federal government and agencies).

An important precursor to this current study is the recognition that much of the existing research conducted to date perpetuates a recurring theme toward a deficit view of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' participation into tertiary education. Although contrasting statistical information exists to refute a deficit view to this participation, a lingering sense of the drivers for research into First Nations Australian populations' participation in tertiary education too often stems from deficit view driven criteria, where little positive view material and initiatives are highlighted with equal vigour. Government and other institutional studies often directly or indirectly engender this attitude through the use of criteria that utilise negative indicators to both justify and drive research and tertiary education participation initiatives when concerning First Nations Australian populations (Devlin, 2009).

METHOD, THEMES AND DISCUSSION

Results for this study were derived from data drawn from two key focus group discussions involving 50 participants. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a non–probability sampling approach, specifically a volunteer 'opt–in' sampling strategy (Sue & Ritter, 2007) was embraced for these discussions.

The motivation for using focus group discussions in this research is underpinned by a number of principles. Firstly, the researchers, in support of Jennings (2001), believed that the interaction between group members would add to the richness of data collected, as a result of group members questioning, clarifying and challenging their position as part of the wider discussion. As with interviews, a focus group discussion enabled the researchers to gather more data and in more detail than they would have been able to collect had all the participants been involved in some form of survey (Jennings 2001). The focus group discussion also provided ample opportunity for the facilitator to probe for clarification, thus providing for "continuous assessment and evaluation of information by the inquirer, allowing him to redirect, probe, and summarise" (Guba & Lincoln 1981: 187).

The weaknesses of focus groups, much like the strengths, are linked to the process of producing focused interaction. These weaknesses principally pertain to the role of the moderator, and the risk of dominant members, as both may impact the data (Morgan 1996). In relation to the role of the moderator, a study by Agar and MacDonald (1995), which compared the exchange between interviewers and interviewees in a single focus group to a set of

individual interviews, concluded that the dynamics of the individual interviews put more responsibility on the interviewees to explain themselves to the interviewer, whilst the interviewer's attempts to guide the group discussion disrupted the interaction of group members. A clear assessment of the level of moderator involvement was therefore considered as part of this study. In managing group dynamics, the group facilitator further utilised a culturally inclusive and structured approach, thus encouraging those who might otherwise say little, whilst limiting those who might otherwise tend to dominate.

Each group was lead by an experienced Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elder and/or academic researcher. Group representatives (including both Indigenous Australian and non–Indigenous participants) were noted from various Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations from the health, employment, environment, law enforcement and education sectors. There was also significant representation of wider community support and participation, including students, private education consultants, clergy and other organisational representation. The focus group discussions were held in formal settings, at Southern Cross University's Coffs Harbour Campus. A research assistant was used as a note taker facilitating a free flowing discussion (focus groups) between the facilitator and group participants, and to record participant responses. This is a method supported by Fontana and Frey (1994). In addition, each focus group discussion was recorded via digital recording means. This presented the researchers with a full account of the dialogue following each focus group. Such dialogue assisted in addressing the issue of investigator triangulation.

Data Analysis

The analysis endeavoured to constantly look 'for what appears to be the main concern or problem for the people in the setting' (Strauss, 1987: 35). With the general research aim in mind, audio recordings of focus group discussions were reviewed, transcribed into electronic form, and read for clarity with the dominant concepts noted. By 'eyeballing' the transcripts, questions and responses were clearly marked to detect the balance of narrative between interviewer and interviewee (Smith, Chen & Liu, 2008). Equally, searching for repetitions within transcripts is best done by eyeballing, although this can be quite time consuming (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Although electronic methods of coding data are increasingly being used by researchers, Basit (2003) suggests that the use of software may not be considered feasible to code only a few interviews, a stance supported by Green and Thorogood (2004).

The qualitative results garnered from these discussions were highly informative and enlightening to the wider research objective, with specific themes reflecting some (continuing) major challenges and significant obstacles faced by Indigenous Australian populations with respect to participation to higher education noted. Some of these challenges can be critical to that success, with some early themes arising from focus group discussions. These themes are noted in Table 1 and will be further discussed in the following section. Accompanying each identified theme are key excerpts taken from the focus group discussions.

Table 1: Focus Group Discussion Results – Key Themes and Related Excerpts

Key Theme	Relevant Focus Group Excerpt
The impact of short–term, fractured stakeholder ship and engagement activities, which may lead to misunderstanding and a 'hands off' mentality from non–Indigenous institutions and community, which often lead to the perception of little financial, social and educational support.	• "If you look at what is the purpose of higher education, are you fighting something that really isn't of a useful purpose or are you trying to change a system to make it more [about] social justice…and more being about cultural diversity? So you've got to constantly battle with yourself: do I play the game, [or risk] losing your own integrity". • "That is a very good question: is education still a manner of oppression or institutionalization? If I myself didn't feel strongly at this stage of my life about who I was I would find it very difficult [to undertake further study]. I know that I shied away from any institution of higher education when I was younger because I wasn't sure of those things for myself. I was afraid of becoming some of those [negative] things that we have described". • "We have financial barriers, cultural barriers, family commitment. These issues have always been there in higher education".
Misunderstandings about the role and implementation of the Indigenous Oral Tradition vs. Western written tradition, their perspective use and implementation in an understanding of 'what is knowledge', 'what is education'.	• "Over the years since I've completed my studies, I have gathered a lot of information, and what I'm seeing and [starting to] understand is who is a 'specialist' in our area [of Indigenous studies]. For me, the Elders are [the] specialists". • "I myself never heard of 'university', the word, until I was 26". • "[We] talked about North America, Canada having their own Indigenous universities. Has it ever been put forward in any way about having our own Aboriginal University in Australia?"
Unclear ideas or understanding about authorship in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and materials.	• "If higher education institutions say 'we're offering an Advanced Diploma in Aboriginal Studies', what does that mean?; who is driving that? Who's determining what that content should be and why or why not?" • "I have three questions about course materials for Aboriginal People – who said it, who wrote it and who is teaching it?"
Persistent incomplete perspectives from early education that either did not attempt or successfully convey the historical perspective of Australia's First Peoples roles in the national history (as expressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non–Indigenous attendees – 'They never taught us that').	• "I have to contend with the history that was never talked about, because they [our Elders] were told to shut up, they are not allowed to talk about their lives". • "We [the Elders] should be writing university [subjects, aimed] especially at a mature age [student], and it should be accepted by the academic fraternity".

Emergent Themes, Discussion and Relevant Linkages

There are inherent dangers to the assumption that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations see institutions of higher education as accessible in the first instance. It was expressed, through the focus groups, that apprehension exists in working with or going to 'the uni' (which is further discussed in Aseron, Greymorning, Miller & Wilde, 2013). This notion appears to be supported in the literature. According to Duminy (1973), Indigenous education cannot be understood or considered without an appreciation of the environment in which it takes place. As such, a marked characteristic of this environment lies in the outlook of its members. Farrelly and Lumby (2009: 14) assert that despite more than 25 years of cultural awareness programs operating in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples continue to find many institutions, such as health providers and other services "alienating and uncomfortable" and continue to experience poor outcomes as a result.

Group participants indicated that this apprehension could be mitigated to a greater or lesser degree by understanding that participation might be better served through sustainable Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led and/or shared engagement activities, while conversely, not engendered by fractured attempts to engage First Nations Australian populations in one–off or infrequent events. As noted in a 2005 report to the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, one of the most fundamental 'pre–conditions' necessary for achieving long–term sustainable change in Indigenous educational outcomes is the widening of Indigenous participation in the life and governance of University institutions. For "an integrated policy approach is needed to advance Indigenous

higher education…Equal attention must be given to, among other things, the recruitment and support of Indigenous students; the recruitment, support and promotion of Indigenous staff; and the building and strengthening of Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Research. Urgent action is needed in all these areas if a positive cycle of participation in higher education, which breed further participation in higher education, is to be established" (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2005: 5).

A further critical theme expressed through the focus group discussions were conflicting ideas about a shared understanding for what comprises education, higher education participation and/or practice. As articulated by one Elder Aboriginal Australian, there was a conflict in the presentation of cultural history, where their interpretation was that one would not find their cultural history in a book, the implication being that this kind of knowledge utilises different methods of transference. Commenting on this, another Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participant stated:

'I have three questions about course materials for Aboriginal People – who said it, who wrote it and who is teaching it?'

History contends that learning materials purporting to depict the knowledge systems of traditional First Peoples in Australia were almost exclusively developed by non–Aboriginal Australian authors, who were 'privileged' with the task of providing character representations of Aboriginality in texts (Miley, 2006). Among the many conceptual issues noted in the literature, the integration of traditional Indigenous knowledge systems, learning, methods and materials, developed by Indigenous community representatives on a foundation of Indigenous values, philosophies and methodologies, has great potential to effect positive educational changes for learners – both Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and non–Indigenous participants, a view supported by Bierkerman & Townsend Cross (2008). There is clearly a call for educators and educational institutions to build bridges between the Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to achieve meaningful outcomes, for Indigenous students in particular but for all students in general (Williamson & Dalal, 2007). As highlighted by Christie (2006, p. 79), the key challenge remains: how does one build bridges between the Western scientific and disciplinary knowledge and the Indigenous 'responsive, active eco–logical' knowledge that views 'language, land, and identity as interdependent in a unique way and constantly renewed and reconfigured?'

These linkages appear highly relevant in an Australian context, as Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander oral history is often dismissed as an unequal historical authority compared to the written word (Blacklock, 2009). The ensuing 'history war', fuelled by historians such as Windschuttle (2002), has largely been underpinned by Anglo Australian perspectives and research methodologies, whilst the perspectives of Australian First Nations People are seldom evident (Blacklock, 2009). Again, this is hardly surprising, given that historical depictions of Aboriginality have largely been written by non–Indigenous historians and writers; whilst the unique perspectives of Australian Indigenous historians are still only emerging (Blacklock, 2009).

CONCLUSION

As noted previously, a key aim of this paper was to better understand the various ways in which participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education might be improved and how such challenges may help speak to future strategic directions and policy initiatives within higher education institutions. Where much literature exists as to the lack of participation for Indigenous populations to tertiary or higher education, this current study found some very basic and simple questions (and/or themes) had not been pursued within the broader research agenda.

Despite the exploratory nature of this study, the researchers found that a divergent understanding exists as to some very simple queries, including (but not limited to):

- What are some of the specific needs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders that will assist in creating authentic pathways into higher education?
- What are some of the current understandings or views that people have about tertiary or higher education participation by and for First Nation Peoples of Australia?

- What has either helped them or hindered them in making informed choices at their key life transitions that lead to participation in tertiary or higher education?

This current study has endeavoured, in an exploratory fashion, to aid in the closing of this gap. Clearly, further investigation in this area is needed to better identify and define challenges and obstacles. Future efforts should be inclusive of ideas that identify positive initiatives and strategies that inform long-term solutions for a shared pathway to Higher Education Participation (for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, educational institutions, agencies and other stakeholder groups).

LIMITATIONS

This study contains a number of limitations. Firstly, as noted in Aseron, Greymorning, Miller & Wilde (2013), Indigenous populations encompass a tribal affiliation system that does not recognise borders in the same manner as their non–Indigenous counterparts, whereby institutional research initiatives are typically constrained to smaller geographical regions that often do not correlate with tribal boundaries. This has the potential to limit the generalisation of results across other Indigenous communities. One should proceed with caution when seeking to extrapolate findings from this research across other Indigenous Peoples as a whole. Further studies in other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders communities, or other nearby regions and countries, could extend the scope of this investigation.

A second limitation of this research related to focus group participation. The degree of fit between a sample and the target population about which generalisations can be made is a common challenge in many studies (Rhodes, Bowie & Hergenrather, 2003). It is recognised that those stakeholders invited to contribute in the qualitative phase of this project do not constitute the entire population of stakeholders. Future research could be strengthened with the input of other groups of interest.

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